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January/February 2022

# big game

## FISHING JOURNAL

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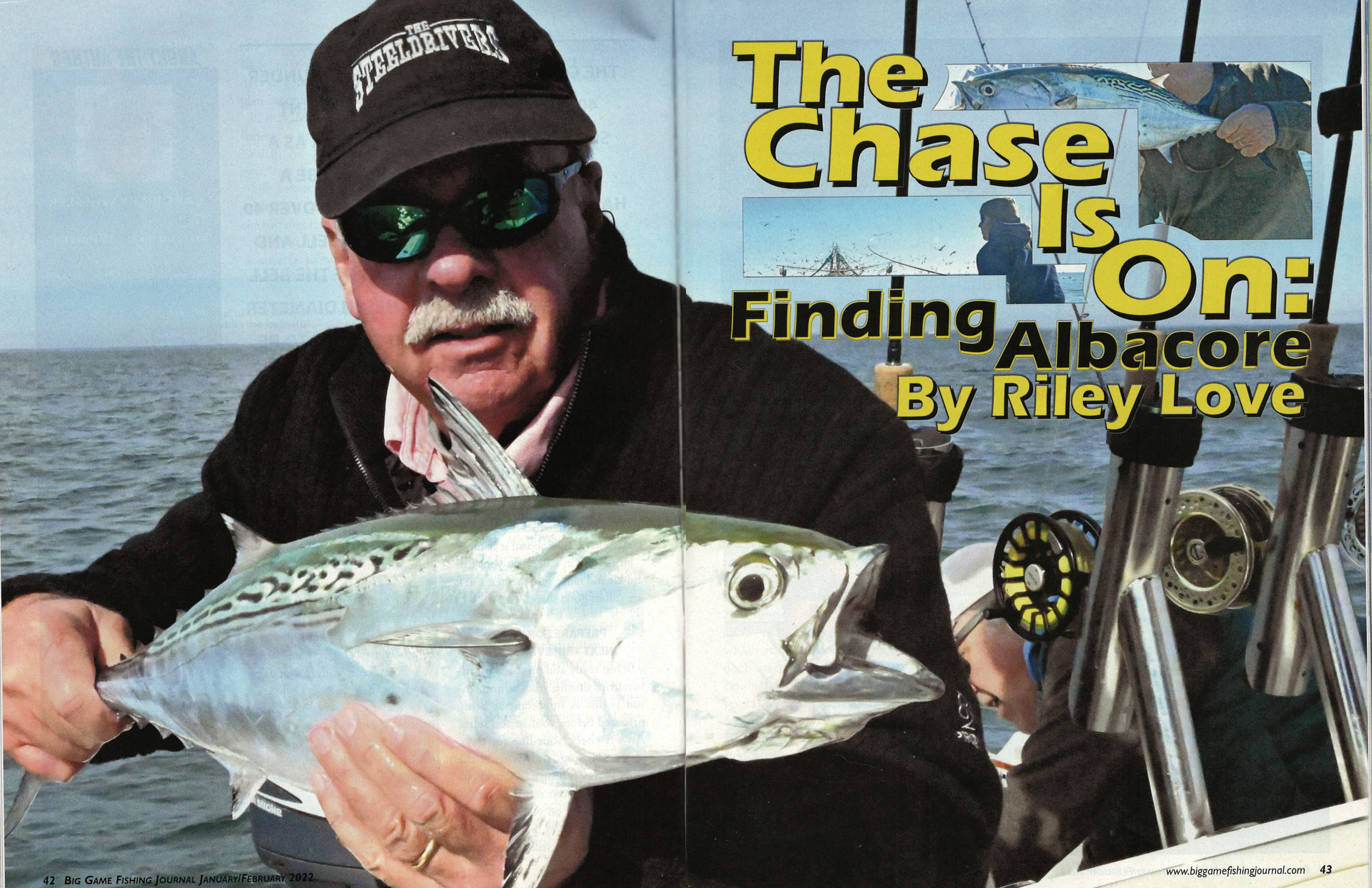
**CHASING**  
FALSE ALBACORE



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# The Chase Is On: Finding Albacore By Riley Love







Speckled sea trout are just one of the many species that make fishing off North Carolina a treat.

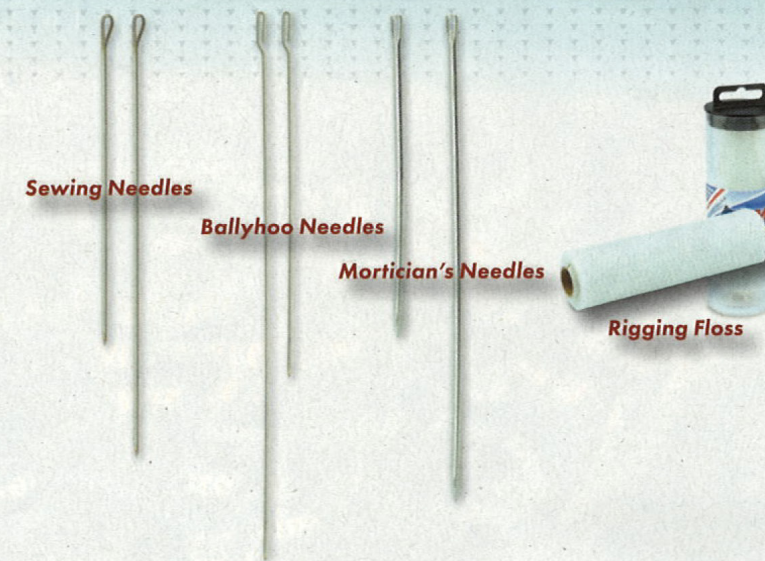


North Carolina is a romantic coast. Pale windswept dunes covered with waving sea oats and diagonally reaching juniper trees stir a solemn melancholy in the spirit. This is truly art in nature, which the human hand attempts but rarely perfects to such measure. The encroachment of civilization feels luckless.

The white sands and clear water have moved the North Carolinians to call this strand the Crystal Coast. It is also a shore of multiple fisheries. Come the early spring, schools of bluefish arrive. Spanish mackerel come in good numbers and last until summer's end, when they have achieved considerable size. Shad and stripers migrate up-river where the fishing is torrid. Cobia up to 90 pounds are major targets of guided fishing trips near shore. Flounder is popular here in the restaurants and specimen the size of doormats are taken. King mackerel are prime targets of the fall. Speckled and gray sea trout and both red and black drum stay through the winter.

As water temperature exceeds 70 degrees, mahi-mahi migrate up the coast for the offshore fleet, which stands impressively at the dock at Atlantic Beach. An occasional sailfish is taken as well as several tuna species. Summertime for these anglers is bookmarked by the Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament. This is a prestigious event. The "big rock" is a group of underwater structures 35 miles to the southeast. As the Gulf Stream current abuts this, upwellings of oxygen and nutrient-rich

## THE POINT IS...



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A bevy of birds swarm for bait that's reacting to fish pursuing below the surface.

water project toward the surface. This supports the building block species for the food chain and then becomes a parking lot for big game pelagic predators. Thus, this area has a lot going for its fisheries: structure, a conveyor belt offshore current, and substantial rivers for anadromous migrating breeders.

A further word about the Gulf Stream. It was formed by the closure of the Isthmus of Panama, separating flow between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Since 1910, fossils studies supported its closure about 3 million years ago. More recent mineral evidence pushes it back much further. This also served to provide for the biotic interchange of land species between North and South America as well as geographic speciation,

isolating the two water's marine varieties ever since.

Our eyes immediately tell us of the close relationship between members of the Scombridae family, 51 members in all. This includes representatives whose distribution is limited to the Pacific and Indian oceans. Crossing Panama, they are immediately abundant. Close relatives, separated for all time by that narrow bridge of the new world which immortalized Balboa with its crossing. They no longer share the genetic pools between oceans. As wrote Rudyard Kipling: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

On our Atlantic side, false albacore, albies or little tunny occur all the way across to Africa and into the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

Like their cousins, the tuna, they can regulate their body temperatures up to 20 degrees Fahrenheit above the ambient environment. This separates them from other fish with ability to swim fast and far. Additionally, because they lack a swim bladder, they can rocket up and down the water column.

October and November are the months they migrate along this coast of North Carolina. So, then predators follow – including yours truly. Ah, Scombridae! From the Greek meaning "hell-valottafunonlighttackle." This is a fine niche on the calendar when many anglers back home are pulling their boats out for winter.

Capt. Dean Lamont, [Crystalcoastadventures.com](http://Crystalcoastadventures.com), is an experienced angler for every kind of fish in these waters. He has served



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False albacore will put on a show that will keep you casting long after you should have called it quits.



in numerous advisory and conservation organizations and has been a guest instructor for many fly fishing and fly tying expos. He has a flats-style boat for up the estuaries and a 25-foot center console for out from the shore.

Targeting albies is just like runnin' and gunnin' for other tuna species off the west coast of the Americas. Balls of bait are chased up to the top by these fast-moving predators. The albies detonate the surface into water molecules with their frenzy, hurling themselves into the air. Seabirds are the angler's pack hounds all the way to the horizon and a group of birds knifing down on a school will get the throttle slammed down hard. The albies will frequently present right along the beach or several miles out,

wherever the baits have collected. The depth finder tells you what you already know: those huge balls are all around and the missile streaks of albies slash up and across the screen at acute angles.

We are sight hunters, not auditory or olfactory. The activation of our visual cortex causes excitement across the higher brain neurons, the pleasure-pain center, and the memory cortex like no other sense. The result ... we love this stuff.

When they're bustin' baits up top and the boat is roaring in chase, there is no way to get too much of it. The first one or two fish on the deck would regurgitate the current daily lunch special and we would match the hatch with lure selection. This also added some predictability of the

fish's behavior. Capt. Dean explained that the silver-side minnows they were feeding on would disperse from the tight balled-up school when they were attacked. Thus, the organized mayhem of the albies would only last a few moments. Then the albies would vanish to pop up again nearby, lacerating another bait ball. When anchovies were on the menu, the bait schools would stay together despite the molestation and the target for the casting fisherman would last much longer.

These fish are so strong and fast that hooking up with lighter spin tackle left you standing on the deck wondering if ... or when ... their run would stop.

Albies also are a viable target for fly fishermen. This extrapo-

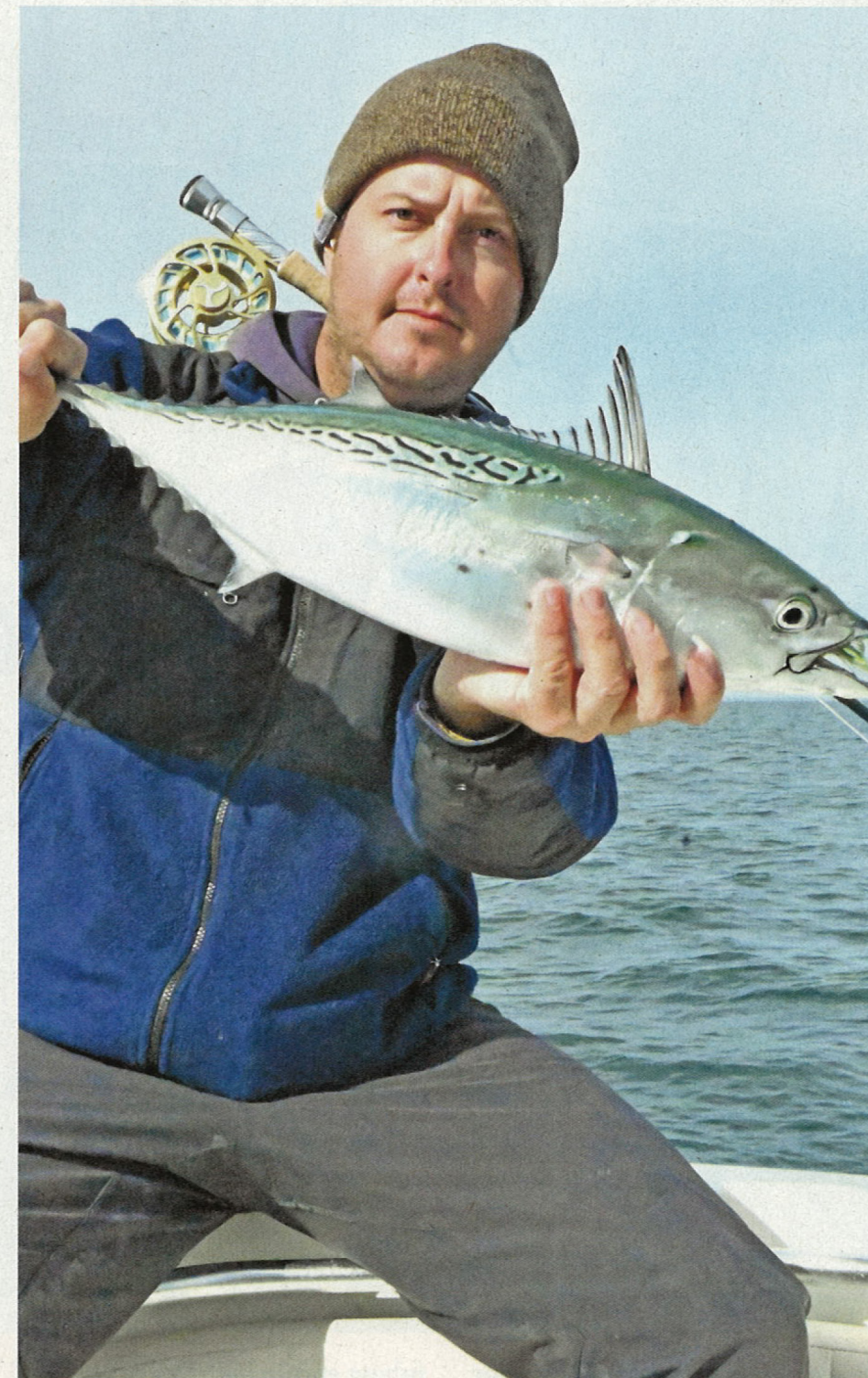


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Fly fishing gear is an excellent way to pursue false albacore and many of the other species swimming off the North Carolina coast, because the action on flies like these made Capt. Dean will be simply amazing.



Your arms will tire but you'll never want to stop casting to active false albacore.

lates to later-day targets of red-fish and trout that also readily engulf an offered fly. Capt. Dean tied all the flies we used during the trip. They were similar to Clouser minnows but with a noticeable bias toward that hue that is precisely halfway between yel-

low and green on the color wheel. He liked to quote his old friend Lefty Kreh: "If it ain't chartreuse, it ain't no use."

I have a tough time stopping when fishing for albies. "One last cast" for me is like a woman saying, "I'll be ready in 5 minutes." 🐟

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**RILEY LOVE** is a physician and writer living in Kentucky. Some of his first steps brought him to the water's edge and he has been traveling the world to fish ever since. Beginning with the lakes and streams of the Midwest, he is part of a three-generation tradition of discovering back-country destinations for sport fishing on multiple continents.

After 50 years of fishing travel, his only goals are to go somewhere new and try something different again this year. He also has a home in Key Largo, Fla., where he regularly fishes and also scuba dives. He has published more than two dozen articles on a variety of subjects but his chief interest is the fact and fiction of fishing. He is a member of the International Game Fish Association and The Billfish Foundation.